

MASTERCLASS



ABOVE Stuff Smith at the Onyx Club, New York, in 1944. Smith made a gruff, horn-like sound quality at the frog

Photo: Charles B. Nadel, courtesy A.B. Fable Archive

Jazz bowings:

Phrasing

Rhythmic subtext

Bow placement

There are over 30 active string styles played worldwide and each requires a slightly different touch and quality of motion from the bow hand. While music notation can help interpret style by conveying which notes within the phrase should be slurred or accentuated, many alternative string scores actually omit this pertinent information. It is assumed that only the melody need be conveyed and that the player is already conversant with the stylistic intricacies of the genre. This is, in part, due to the fact that fiddle and jazz styles are rooted in an aural tradition and because the visual road map would be too cumbersome if notation attempted to convey stylistic details.

The organic feel of a style emanates from three crucial elements: phrasing, rhythmic subtext and bow placement. Let's look at each of these.

Do you sound uninspired when you try alternative styles? How should you interpret the printed notes?

Julie Lyonn Lieberman

reads between the lines to bring life to your right hand

PHRASING

When we speak of phrasing we refer to how we colour and shape each melodic statement through varied note transitions, textures and dynamics. Many alternative string styles were originally integral to the accompaniment of local dance forms and so the rhythmic use of the bow evolved to drive the dancer's feet and propel him or her through space. Such minute modulations in pressure, volume and motion – along with varied entrances and exits – call upon the player to innovate and initiate sound on every note rather than homogenising bow strokes for entire lines, as is more often the case in the classical literature. Physically, this requires constant fluctuation in pressure, speed and on- and off-the-string motion.

As discussed earlier, most alternative scores or tune books do not indicate how to phrase in a manner appropriate to the style. For instance, here is an opening to a jazz standard as written in an anthology of jazz tunes:



It is assumed that each artist will shape the melody according to their own individual taste with selective bowings, ornamentation and chromatic passing notes. Here is just one of many possible interpretations of this same melodic phrase as played by an experienced jazz player:



Now let's take a look at how the classical versus the alternative string player might interpret the symbol of the dot. In either style it indicates that the note should be played shorter than written. If applied to crotchets (♩), the classical player would use a martelé bow stroke (or on-the-string staccato), while faster

rhythms would call for spiccato, off-the-string staccato or bounced bow. It is understood in either case that the effect will be applied symmetrically, the same effect used on each note. This is not always so for the jazz or Latin player, but it is easier to read this notation:



than it is to read this:



While the dot might be included to remind the player to use shorter bows rather than fulfil the note length as written, there are a number of ways to interpret the entrance and exit to that note. The alternative string player may change the textural or dynamic interpretation of the abbreviated note, depending upon where the note falls in the phrase. For instance, the note might be initiated using a brush-stroke entrance or a bite (a milder version of martelé).

The note can be completed by stopping the bow cold using one of at least three methods: by stopping the motion of the forearm without changing bow pressure; by using a slight dig into the string (this could entail a slight drag towards the end of the note or a quick jerk downwards); or by using the hand and arm differently. You can create this last effect by leaning into the index finger while pushing downward from the forearm or by lightening arm pressure like an aeroplane lifting into flight. Choose a note and try a few of these articulations:

- Stop the bow cold without changing volume
- Stop the note by using a slight dig into the string
- Lighten the weight of the bow by lifting it off the string just as the note should stop

RHYTHMIC SUBTEXT

Fiddle, blues or jazz tunes in the hands of classical violinists almost always sound bland and uninspiring at first. It is like a rocking chair without its rocker – and remains so until players learn how to switch off their legato–vibrato tendencies and pulse the phrases according to the language of the style. Each style has its own rhythmic dance. This is because each has a pulse that can rarely be found in the actual notated rhythmic figures, but flows continuously underneath the melody. This unique rhythmic signature is felt by the player throughout the tune – even during rests and held notes – whether or not they articulate it directly.

To practise audiating (hearing in your head) a rhythmic subtext while playing, play four walking crotchets:



Then, at the same tempo, play a triplet on each beat to warm up your ears:



BOWING IN THE ALTERNATIVE STRING LITERATURE

The following bowing is used in swing and jazz. It naturally emphasises the up-beat by placing each change of bow direction on the weak part (the 'and') of the beat:



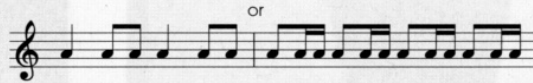
Notice how the repetitive use of the up bow, an accentuation of the fourth beat of the bar and an asymmetrical slur within a triplet all help to convey a jazz sound:



The following bow pattern incorporates quavers into asymmetrical groupings, a sound popular in both swing and fiddle literature:



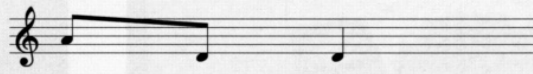
The shuffle stroke is an essential bow pattern for old-time, bluegrass and Cajun fiddling:



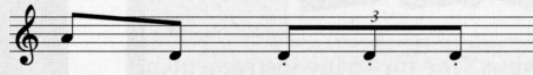
The Georgia Shuffle, used in old-time and bluegrass literature, employs string crossing to create an asymmetrical phrase:



The 'bowed treble' or 'Irish triplet' is rarely written the way it actually sounds. A crotchet (♩) within the melody usually invites this figure:



or sometimes the triplet is written out like this:



but it actually sounds more like this:



Now go back to the crotchet rhythm while hearing and feeling a triplet subtext.

If you do this correctly, your walking crotchets should change from a feel and sound akin to a measured march to a rounder, more continuously flowing quality.



Let's look at some examples of style-specific rhythmic subtexts. In jazz there is a constant triplet pulse underlying swing music, even when the player ▶

is playing quavers (♪). On paper you see quavers, and fledgling players tend to dot these in an effort to capture the swing sound, only to end up sounding stilted. The tune will be notated like this:



A beginner will interpret it as follows:



An experienced jazz musician will shape the phrase with a triplet feel:



The shuffle stroke (a bow stroke made up of a long-short-short pattern) found at the foundation of old-time, bluegrass and Cajun tends to be articulated slightly differently for each of the three styles. Listen to recorded examples to determine the subtle peculiarities of each style. The English language has many pronunciations even within the same country, and this is equally true for the shuffle stroke. The most common error made by players new to any of these three styles is to emphasise the long bow stroke. The rhythmic subtext must bring out the 'and' of each beat to be successful, by accentuating the first of the two shorter strokes.

The beginning fiddler will tend to interpret the shuffle stroke like this:



But the accent should be placed on the weak part of the beat, depending upon how the melody is notated; in this case, on the second half of each beat:



Here is an example of how an old-time tune might be written in a tune book:



The player is expected to know the style and therefore how to interpret the notation:



Afro-Cuban style is built on rhythmic cycles called *clave*. There are two basic *clave* – forward and reverse – and then a number of additional variations. Once again, no matter what rhythms the player employs while performing solos or playing the melody, the *clave* is essential to the rhythmic subtext of the music. The musician should be able to go for a walk with it still

cranking in their inner ear, then return to the band room and be in sync with the band before even walking back into the room!

Forward *clave*:



Reverse *clave*:



BOW PLACEMENT

The physical properties of the bow are such that different effects can be elicited from its different parts. Jazz violinist Randy Sabien creates a swing feel at the tip of his bow; historic jazz violinist Stuff Smith made a gruff, horn-like sound quality at the frog; many Irish fiddlers tend to dwell three-quarters of the way up the bow; Scandinavian fiddlers often use a long sweeping motion; and bluegrass, Gypsy and Klezmer fiddlers have as many different techniques as classical players.

Bluegrass fiddler Richard Greene has adapted the popular comping (accompaniment) technique known as 'chop technique'. Commonly used in bluegrass, it involves a simple pitchless landing at the middle of the bow to mark the second and fourth beats of the bar. Greene has developed complex rhythmic percussive patterns at the frog by using modulations in left-hand pressure and accentuating certain down- and up-beats within a harmonic phrase (with double-stops). Darol Anger and the Turtle Island Quartet have further developed this effect. Chop technique has helped string players expand from a melodic, soloistic role in the band to include a rhythmic role behind other instruments or string players as they play solos. To learn this technique, you will need to see it demonstrated (see Educational Materials box).

Teaching subtle variations about sound creation through the written word can at best only give you awareness of what to listen for: turn to the masters within each style for the application of this material. ■

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Irish Martin Hayes, Live in Seattle, Green Linnet GLCD1195; www.greenlinnet.com
Old-time Bruce Molsky, Contented Must Be, Rounder CDROUND0534; www.bruce-molsky.com
Latin Susie Hansen, Solo Flight, Jazz Caliente JZC222; www.susiehansen.com
Jazz Luluk, Born Free, Zebra Records ZA 44412-2; www.luluk.com
Swing Stephane Grappelli/Stuff Smith/Jean-Luc Ponty, Jazz Violin Summit, Legacy International CD477

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

String Groove Rhythmic Explorations for Bowed Strings (DVD), Darol Anger with Casey Driessen and Rushad Eggleston, Homespun Tapes; www.homespuntapes.com
Rhythimizing the Bow (DVD), Julie Lyonn Lieberman, Hal Leonard; www.halleonard.com
Techniques for the Contemporary String Player – Part One: the Bow Hand (VHS), Julie Lyonn Lieberman, Hal Leonard